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ABSTRACT

The author argues that four activities basic to the writing process are ideation, immersion, incubation, and interaction. Ideation is defined as the process of thinking about what is to be written. Immersion is the process of building a file of materials or thoughts on a particular subject. Incubation is allowing the subconscious to supply ideas and thoughts about the topic which is to be written about. Interaction includes exchanging ideas and drafts with other writers in the classroom. It is argued that these four activities are central to a writer's workshop in the classroom. (TS)

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Tips from Tom, Ben and the Other '76-ers:

Launching a Writer's Workshop

by

Burton Albert, Jr.

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The Declaration of Independence could not be written in today's classroom.

After sequencing the chart story (Grades K-2), the fable (Grade 3), business letter (Grade 4), explanation and directions (Grade 5), report (Grade 6) and, finally, criticism of mirror imagery in Shakespearean tragedies (Grade 12), where would our curriculum committee slot "declaration"?

Besides, from plowing through the same dictionary and study skills in reading, in spelling, in language arts, in social studies and science, would we have a breath left for even a whimper?

Could we tolerate drafts pock-marked with erasures, cross-outs, insertions, and misspellings? For doesn't that untidiness prove we have to wrestle first with capitalization, punctuation, don't and doesn't, deletion transforms, sentence expansions and grammatical terms before we can expect an apprentice to write a halfway decent sentence?

Most important, could we ever assemble 56 people in the same chamber for four days without an executive waiver from General Albert Shankerton?

Yet we might not have to get the shingles fretting about the surplus. Maybe we could thin the ranks "administratively."

Could we ship that wisecracking Ben Franklin to the principal's office, along with John Penn? We had warned the North Carolinian, "If you don't stop that constant whispering, young man, you'll be next."

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Could we release Samuel Chase and Benjamin Harrison to the guidance people? They overheard that Big Benjy's nicknamed "Falstaff." And Sam's psyche needs salvaging, too; nearly everyone calls him "Bacon Face."

Could we scuttle three-fifths of the Massachusetts delegation? Perhaps we could assign the bright but obnoxious John Adams to Class GG (Gifted Group) and sigh "He's out of my hair." Elbridge Gerry could take speech therapy for his stammering. Samuel Adams could be handed a pass to the nurse's office for an examination of his watering eyes and bobbing head.

And what about Tom Jefferson? Could we box him in a carrel and shove him a pile of ditto drillsheets? Imagine, a bright boy like him insists on putting an apostrophe in the possessive i-t-s. It's frustating! Even worse, his papers look as if he's never heard of a capital letter--run-on after run-on.

For now let's overlook such things that happen in the name of education. Let's scrap much of what passes for the teaching of composition. Instead, let's examine the writing process as we should teach it and as it was demostrated in Philadelphia two hundred years ago.

On June 11, 1776, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, Sherman and Livingston were appointed a Committee of Five to prepare the Declaration. Jefferson, who seldom uttered a word in large gatherings but was prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive in committees and conversation, met with his colleagues. They discussed the Declaration--much about its content, little about its form.

Then sitting at his portable lap-desk on the second floor of the Graff homestead, Jefferson worked his copy. And from what we know of the Virginian's love and respect for language, we can easily assume he produced a series of drafts before submitting the so-called Rough Draft to Adams and Franklin, both of whom suggested changes.

Thereafter, Jefferson penned in 16 more alterations, even pasting an additional paragraph to the Draft before proffering it again to his two compatriots. Then a fair copy was turned over to the full Committee of Five and finally to the Second Continental Congress, who, for nearly three hot days, battled not only with horseflies from a neighboring stable but with Jefferson's words and the meanings they stood for. In this rewriting and editing process, the colonists made 86 changes and eliminated 488 words.

The birth of the Declaration pretty much followed the writing process not as we teach it but as writers know and practice it. Months before putting quill to parchment, Jefferson had steeped himself in his subject. He had mulled it over and over and over again. But he didn't give shape to his subject until he drafted and redrafted. Finally he withstood the test of communication by submitting a fair copy to readers who, in the course of questioning and clarifying the meaning of its content, took a copy-editor's care with matters of form, such as punctuation and capitalization.

This same process can and should take place in our classrooms. But before it can happen teachers, principals, supervisors and parents need

to focus on the "i" at the center of the word write. What does it stand for?

I suggest it represents four activities basic to the writing process but virtually ignored in today's curriculum. The activities are ideation, immersion, incubation, and interaction.

Ideation

If we're honest about the way writing is commonly taught in the elementary classroom, we'll recognize this pattern: The teacher tosses out an assignment from a text book, a recipe card, a magazine green page or some other "creative" resource. After twenty minutes or so, the teacher scoops up the papers and bleeds all over them with red pencil. What the teacher bleeds over are zero drafts--drafts in which student-writers haven't yet found their individual subjects. But the teacher treats the papers as if they were final manuscripts crossing a copy-editor's desk. The procedure simply doesn't work. It's a dreadful misuse of the teacher's time and effort. It's a scandalous waste of the texpayer's money. It's a chief reason why Johnny can't write.

Evidenced by more than 5500 student-writing samples I drew from across the nation, the usual "assignment approach" implies three misconceptions. The first is that writing is easy; after all, it only takes twenty minutes or so to whip off a paper. But I'm afraid Dr. Seuss wouldn't agree, for he boils down a 1000 pages to get a 60-page book. Newbery medalist Madeleine L'Engle, author of A Wrinkle in Time, says "that for each page I keep, I've probably thrown away a hundred." [1] The poet James Dickey may try 50, 75,

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[1] Roy Newquist, ed., Conversations (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1967), p. 240.

even 100 lines before settling on one. Roald Dahl, inventor of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, once remarked, "All I have to show for those twenty years of more or less continuous work, morning and afternoon, seven days a week, are thirty-nine little tales, none of which would take you more than twenty-five minutes to read.... By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times"[2] --all proof of what Paul Engle stated: "Before anything else, a work of art is work."[3]

Another implication of the quickie assignment is that the writer is a hack who can churn out papers faster than a woodpecker hammers bugs. Isn't that what we suggest when we assign "I'm a Penny" followed by "Places I Like," "A Funny Surprise," and "What I Did Last Summer"?

The "assignment approach" also implies that the writer merely acts as a stenographer to his or her thoughts, that the writer relaxes in silk lounging robe, beckons the muse, and records the copy.

Not so! Not so!

Writing is more than a Friday afternoon escape valve. It's more than a vehicle for testing spelling, punctuation, capitalization and usage. It's an exhilarating, creative process of molding ideas, of making discoveries. As Carlos Baker of Princeton recently told Newsweek editor Merrill Sheils, "Learning to write is the hardest, most important thing any child does. Learning to write is learning to think."[4]

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[2]Stephen Dunning, Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Short Stories (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), pp. 84-85.

[3]Colman McCarthy, "Writers: Their Real Pay Isn't Money," Los Angeles Times, (October 5, 1969), p. 1.

[4]Merrill Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek, December 8, 1975, p. 61.

A writer--whether Phyllis Wheatley, John Updike, Barbara Tuchman, the local sports reporter, the memo writer, the garden club secretary, the copywriter, the sermonizer, or any one of the assorted writers involved in a 30-second TV commercial--may have hints and fragments of ideas about what he wants to say. But not until the writer drafts and redrafts and redrafts does he give order to a chaos of information and discover meaning.

As someone once remarked, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"

Cervantes pointed out, "The Pen is the Tongue of the Mind."[5]

And C. Day Lewis nearly startles us with this provocative insight: "We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand."[6] That, succinctly stated, is the difference between writing as transcription and writing as discovery.

If we begin to perceive writing as a process of exploring inner space, we'll ditch our whoop-de-doo writing assignments and our warm-up drills for the Big Quiz Show (the S.A.T). We'll approach the teaching of writing as the survival skill of thinking. Then we'll honestly earn our professionalism and paychecks.

Immersion

In later years when Jefferson reflected upon the Declaration, he recalled that he referred to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it.

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[5] Miguel de Cervantes, The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote, Ozell's rev. trans. of Peter Motteux (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 543.

[6] C. Day Lewis, The Poet's Task (London: Oxford University Press, 1951) p. 15.

That's not surprising. Jefferson had immersed himself in the literature of liberty. He had read widely, conversed, debated and stewed about the British rule. He didn't need the books or pamphlets because he had already done an enormous amount of prewriting. In drafting, he gave order to that chaos of prewritten information; he discovered and clarified what he truly thought and believed.

By giving writing assignments and allowing virtually no time for development, we neglect the writer's deep psychological drive for immersion. We flirt with satisfying the need through sentence-expanding strategies in which we dribble facts to our students, forgetting they are not devoid of experiences to write about. But even sentence-expanding would join the horse and buggy if we carved out and worshiped the behavorial objective of "learning to immerse." Writer after writer would cheer the cause.

Theodore White, for example, author of The Making of the President, once observed, "I have 80 notebooks full. Ten percent of what I've got will be useful. I spent six weeks in Vietnam and I don't think I'll use a page of it."[7]

Ann Petry reports: "When I begin to research a book, I usually read widely about the period first. Then I begin to look for detail--what kind of houses people lived in, the kind of clothing they wore, the kind of food they ate. I build a file based on the material. I concentrate on politics--how people thought about their leaders, their government, and their laws. I find out what was going on in other parts of the world at the time. I read old books, bound copies of old magazines, and letters written by or about the main characters.

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[7] Israel Shenker, "Theodore White Ponders Making of Another President," New York Times, January 2, 1969, p. 25.

"The research is so detailed and widespread that in the case of Harriet Tubman, for example, I could make my way on foot from the eastern shore of Maryland to Philadelphia, following the same route that Harriet followed. I know enough about the slave trade in the United States to write a book about it and one about the anti-slavery movement, too. I could build a slave cabin, draw a picture of the insides of a slave ship. I am also quite familiar with the plant and animal life of the eastern shore of Maryland."[8]

Unfortunately, we rarely encourage students to dig in like Jefferson, White or Petry. Instead, we give students wind sprints--a series of brief, disconnected writing tasks--and then we wonder why they fail so miserably when they try to run the distance.

This paradox struck me a while ago, during field-testing of some composition materials. When urged to list a number of specific details about topics of interest to them, middle-graders struggled to jot down enough to cover eight picas--the average length of a blank line on a ditto sheet or workbook page. For several workshops, they could root up no more than four or five words per session. After all the blank-filling they'd done for years, these children of the vending machine world of Big Macs and Instant Whip had been conditioned to stretch no further.

But in a workshop climate, they can stretch and will stretch if we give them the time to explore their individual subjects, even to do a reasonable amount of research for some of their stories.

The latter suggestion collides, of course, with another misconception. Textbook after textbook implies that a writer limits research to a report

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[8]Donald M. Murray and Burton Albert, Jr., Write to Communicate: The Language Arts In Process (Pleasantville, New York: Reader's Digest Services, Inc., 1973), Level 5, Poster 4.

or other nonfiction, but, according to these bibles, the writer draws solely from his skull for a story or other imaginative piece.

This is not necessarily true. In order to lend believablility to an imaginary world or character, the writer of fiction may do as much research as any technical writer, biographer or historian. By collecting data from actual resources and brewing them with a rich, awakened imagination, a writer can build a fictional world with specific, accurate, honest details that will make readers see, taste, touch, hear and smell--details that will make readers believe.

For Family Under the Bridge Natalie Savage Carlson recalls that "day after day I went into Paris and walked the streets that might have been known to the people of my story. On these walks I often saw gypsies. So I brought them into the story too. I began the special notebook about the family living in danger under the bridge. Into this I jotted down notes about how the people looked and talked."[9]

Now there's a recipe worth trying!

"While working on From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler," E. L. Konigsburg reports, "I read extensively about the Italian Renaissance and about Michelangelo: Vasari's Lives of the Painters of the Italian Renaissance, Berenson's Italian Painters of the Renaissance, The Agony and the Ecstasy by Stone, Stones of Florence by Mary McCarthy. I also read an account of the research on a statue attributed to Michelangelo: 'The Lost St. John.' I perused art books in book stores and libraries. And I took trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, finding places they might hide, probing and

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[9]Ibid., Level 4, Poster 7.

poking and asking questions of the Public Relations Staff and of the guards (only enough not to arouse suspicion)."[10]

What an education those excursions must have been!

And when Marguerite Henry saddles up for a story--as with Misty of Chincoteague or King of the Wind--she "haunts libraries, big and small, borrowing books ten at a clip. I devour every pertinent magazine, too, and newspapers and pamphlets. These tell me how much there is to learn and whet my appetite for more. They give me the beginnings of a working knowledge of my subject so that when I go to the scene of the story, I know what questions to ask."[11]

Now let's consider the implications: If we foster in our students the writer's attitude toward immersion, how naturally we could integrate the language arts. Spurred on by a curious hunger for specifics, students are more likely to gobble up a stack of reading materials, master the card catalog and cross references, interview sources, ask effective questions, take notes, and so on. Why? Because caught up in their individual subjects and fascinated by the sounds of their own voices, students would have a worthwhile--almost compulsive--reason to use the skills that will lend authority and believability to whatever they're writing.

Incubation

Through immersion and openness to experience, a student will also absorb countless facts and fleeting impressions. These will incubate in his or her subconscious, the source of subjects that should supplant the

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[10] Ibid., Level 6, Poster 4.

[11] Ibid., Level 5, Teacher's Guide 2, p. 9.

textbook assignment, the recipe card, the photo-starter, the idea mobile or other gimmick. Those devices try to speed up the process of finding a subject. But in believing we're hastening the process, we unwittingly ask students to be dishonest, as they play Scrabble with a few key words, trying to write about topics they know little or nothing about or have little or no interest in. The popular "instructional devices" lead thirty students to say nearly the same thing in nearly the same words. Dull is the monotonous drone of their single uniform voice!

"So often," says Louisa Shotwell, the author of Roosevelt Grady, "it's the unrelated, accidental (serendipitous?) bits that stick in your mind--and rise to the surface weirdly and providentially--that turn out to be the nuggets of gold."[12]

Jean George, the Newbery Medal winner for Julie of the Wolves, finds that "ideas for my stories come from memories of my childhood, from events that happen to the people I love, live and work with--and from reading. I mean all reading--ads, books, magazines, newspapers, scientific journals, trashy stuff, classics, my children's homework, post cards, even legal papers. Ideas do not come out of thin air. They lie deep in the subconscious where all these bits and pieces of memories, feelings, and information lie. They bubble to the surface at odd times."[13]

Author of Minn of the Mississippi, Holling C. Holling once reported: "When I feel relaxed and not anxious about anything, often the idea simply flashes into my head .... At such moments, a sort of grateful elation fills me, for somehow I know I have a tale worth the telling."[14]

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[12] Letter from Louisa Rossiter Shortwell, January 30, 1970.

[13] Murray and Albert, Write to Communicate, Level 6, Poster 6.

[14] Letter from Holling C. Holling, February 12, 1970.

Eleanor Estes, creator of The Moffats observed: "I am the sort of writer who would like to have plenty of time in which to do nothing. Time just to sit, or to stand at the window, or watch the ocean, or people, or to wander up the street or about the house, to pace. For often it is in these do-nothing times that the best honey is gathered. 'How many hours a day does the writer write upon his book?' is a question often asked. 'Twenty-four' the answer should be, for does not the writer call upon his dreams?" [15]

"We should suppose," says editor and writer Norman Cousins, "that the function of the creative teacher is to encourage the student to select his own subject from among the things that are coming to life in his mind. He will never learn to write well unless he develops the ability to dream, to stew, and to be possessed by all sorts of notions that are itching to be expressed." [16]

Agreeing are many writers who say, "I never had to choose a subject--my subject chose me."

And in a writer's workshop how do we nurture this subject-finding?

* Most of all, by being as patient as a dandelion awaiting the Alaskan thaw.
* By asking questions that will help students use their senses and language to see details, patterns, and implications in whatever they're doing and studying.
* By sharing our own observations and experiences.
* By listening and questioning, and by showing the student an interested audience is waiting to hear what he or she has to say.
* By leading the student to see that the best subjects nest in everyday

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[15] Eleanor Estes, "Gathering Honey," Horn Book, December, 1960, p. 487.
[16] Norman Cousins, "How to Write Without Thinking," Saturday Review, May 1, 1965, p. 30.

experiences--areas in which the student has an expertise and a harvest of information with which to write.

* By giving each student time to daydream, to toy with specifics, even to muddle through a series of false starts...until just a word or phrase explodes into a subject and sends the student rushing to tell it all.

Interaction

Jefferson, too, must have rushed from the corner of Seventh and Market Streets to Adams's house after penning the draft that pleased him most. Now the young writer was going to discover how effectively he had communicated. Franklin would tell him next. Days later a State House of colonial peers would evaluate his success or failure. For the act of communication isn't completed until the writer has reached a reader.

Yet I'd wager that 95 percent of our students reach no one other than teacher. And, too often she or he finds little time to respond at all. In short, discouraged students drop papers down an empty well.

Writing for nobody is not writing at all. And "the author who assures you," warned Francois Mauriac, "that he writes for himself and that he does not care whether he is heard or not, is a boaster, and is deceiving either himself or you. Every man suffers if he is alone, and the artist is the man for whom and in whom this suffering takes physical form. Beaudelaire was right when he called artists beacons. They light a great fire in the darkness, and they set light to themselves so as to attract the greatest number of their fellow-beings to them."[17]

These "fellow beings" can be student-writer's classmates who interact with each other, exchanging drafts and reading and reacting . . . in a Writer's Workshop, 1976.

[17] Walter Allen ed., Writers on Writing (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), p. 243.

Once we hurl the redundancies and clutter from our language arts curriculum, we can find time for interaction. The benefits are invaluable:

* In a workshop abuzz with activity, students have a legitimate reason to speak and listen. An important part of each student--transplanted to his or her draft--becomes a focus for small-group discussion.
* In evaluating their papers students discover what has and has not worked, what's missing, unbelievable, confusing, unsupported, and so on.
* Students begin to prize the practical importance of commas, periods, capital letters and other mechanical details, when they have a deep-seated urge to communicate to peers they can see, hear and respect.
* Students develop critical reading skills as they learn from their own successes and failures how a writer manipulates symbols to convey information.
* Students play with word choice and word order, not to hurdle the S.A.T. but to pass the test of discovering meaning and communicating it.
* Finally, we, as teachers of writing, can bypass the mountains of zero drafts. Instead, we can delight in the less frequent but more valuable reading of developed papers--pieces of writing in which we hear a cacaphony of voices. <u>That's</u> exciting teaching!

In fact, why not start a writer's workshop tomorrow--unshackled from your own "King George's"? Declare <u>your</u> independence!

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